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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at recent debates about text selection and censorship in Australia. Its aim is to point beyond the terms in which the censorship debate has been conducted in the mass media, and to prompt reflection on how texts are used in English classrooms. The paper raises questions of language and cultural identity in secondary English teaching, arguing the need for a culturally inclusive curriculum that is responsive to the attitudes and values of secondary school students. (Contains 26 references.) (Author/RS)

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and

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Good Dreams/Bad Dreams: Text Selection and Censorship in Australia

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Abstract

This essay looks at recent debates about text selection and censorship in Australia. Our aim is to point beyond the terms in which the censorship debate has been conducted in the mass media, and to prompt reflection on how texts are used in English classrooms. We shall raise questions of language and cultural identity in secondary English teaching, arguing the need for a culturally inclusive curriculum that is responsive to the attitudes and values of secondary school students.

Key words

Text selection, censorship, literature, literacy, culture, canonicity

The following reflections were originally prompted by debates in Australia about suitable books for adolescent readers. John Marsden's *Dear Miffy*, Margaret Clark's *Care Factor Zero*, Maureen Stewart's *Shoovy Jed*, Matt Zurbo's *Idiot Pride* - these examples of 'dirty realism' (McClenaghan, 1997) depict teenage suicide, homelessness, drug dependency, sexual abuse, as well as other dimensions of youth alienation, pointedly refusing to wrap things up with a happy ending (at the conclusion to *Dear Miffy*, the narrator turns on readers with: 'Fucking mind your own fucking business. Fuck you all.'). Columnists in the daily press have pounced on these texts, asserting that we must protect young people from nihilism and despair and give them stories with a more positive spin (Lonsdale, 1997; Legge, 1997; Rayson, 1998). To counter such claims, many writers and teachers have affirmed the right of young people to read relevant and engaging material. Several articles have appeared in *English in Australia*, the journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, which also felt that it was timely to republish AATE's position paper on text selection and censorship (McClenaghan, 1997; Enright, 1998; Hayes, 1998; Lee, 1998; Mullins, 1998).

The debate has been a lively one, full of sound and fury. Yet there is a sense in which it has been fought out in a realm apart from school literacy practices - practices which have their own logic or momentum, regardless of the

conflicting claims which have been made about 'dirty realism'in the mass media - and our aim in this essay is to ground the debate in our knowledge and concerns as English teachers. Above all, we shall ask questions about how texts get used in classrooms, and about the nature of classrooms as sites for negotiating issues of meaning and value. What forces work to exclude certain texts from classrooms? What forces operate to keep texts 'dead' once they get into class? By tackling these questions, we shall try to conceptualise the issue of text selection and censorship in different terms from those in which it has been constructed by the media.

Lolita, Top Girls & Other Aliens

The most salient fact about censorship is that for the media it is a *cause célèbre*. Currently in Australia we are revisiting the *Lolita* controversy some forty years after Nabokov wrote the novel, and some thirty five years after Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of it. The new Adrian Lyne version with Jeremy Irons has been hotly debated by conservative politicians at a national level. Behind the controversy sits our busily earnest Prime Minister, who has not made a secret of his scorn for cultural elites and their tastes, and who sees himself as defending the values of ordinary Australian families.

The controversy distils for us many of the issues which cluster around censorship. One is that, when it comes to defining 'community standards', those who talk the loudest are most likely to be heard. In *Lolita*'s case, the opinions of conservative politicians with an eye to a populist cause carry more weight than the views of the Australian Censorship Board - many of these politicians had not seen the film when they first objected to it, although since then they have had the opportunity to attend a screening especially arranged for them (presumably risking personal moral harm for the greater good of the Australian community). Another typical feature of censorship is that the issue is often reduced to a simplistic focus on the film's theme or content - in *Lolita*'s case, paedophilia, a hot topic in Australia for various reasons - without any consideration of the writer's or director's attitude towards the topic, or what a sophisticated audience might make of it. Australian English teachers are used to such reductivism as a matter of course. To questions of 'community standards' and 'dangerous fictions' we need only add the question of 'literary merit' - is the text 'worthy' of study in our classrooms? - and we have the triumverate of concerns that have pretty much dominated censorship debates in Australia over the past decade or so.

Here are some examples.

- In 1992, when the Victorian Board of Studies included Raymond Brigg's *When the Wind Blows* in its text list for senior students (the text list consisted of sixty titles, from which students were expected to choose four), there were howls of protest from conservative academics and hack journalists that such a text could be set alongside *Othello*. For English teachers in Victoria, the implication was clear: *Othello* was part of the canon and therefore worthy of study. That *When the Wind Blows* combined print and non print text in a challenging way which repaid study, that the cultural worthiness of any text was open to scrutiny - all this knowledge counted for nothing. The controversy so spooked the Board that the following year, when the English Study Committee recommended *Fawlty Towers* for inclusion on the text list, the Executive of the Board rejected it.

- In 1995, after having witnessed an extract from Louis Nowra's semi-autobiographical play, *Summer of the Aliens*, in a girls' school's drama festival, a small group of self-appointed guardians of 'community standards' (worthy allies of the conservative politicians and hack journalists we mentioned earlier), threatened the Department of Education with legal action. Despite the fact that the play had been on the Victorain syllabus for three years, and was incredibly popular with teachers and students alike, it was discreetly removed from the syllabus. It was replaced with another text, Nowra's sequel *to Summer of the Aliens*, *Cosi*, a play similar in content and language. Presumably the vigilantes had not bothered to read or see this one.

- In 1996, the Chancellor of Sydney University, and self appointed Grand Dame of Australian Letters, Dame Leonie Kramer, endorsed the decision of the New South Wales Board of Studies to remove *Top Girls* from the senior syllabus because it lacked 'literary merit'. Despite her previous position as a Professor of English at Sydney University (or because of it?), Dame Leonie seemed unaware that the literary merit of any text no longer resided in *ex cathedra* pronouncements from distinguished personages, but that a case needed to be argued in the market place of cultural relativism.

We are not suggesting that Australian English teachers have taken all this lying down, passively succumbing to conservative sentiment and meekly dropping texts which offend 'community standards'.To the contrary. The 'dirty realism' which we mentioned at the beginning of this essay has been embraced by many teachers precisely because it deliberately stretches the boundaries of suitable fiction for adolescent readers, both with respect to themes it explores and the rawness of the language it uses. As one of our colleagues, David Lee, has argued in *English in Australia*, the presence and potency of such 'dangerous fiction' offers a significant challenge for teachers, pushing our notions of inclusivity and cultural relativism, of the mix of texts we use in classrooms, and the frames of reference we provide for reading them. For Lee, the advent of such fiction requires us to affirm our role as educators who draw on sound pedagogical and theoretical underpinnings in the debates that assertions of inclusivity and cultural relativism inevitably produce: 'We need to attempt to influence the expectations of parents and administrators in relation to the nature of a literate culture', one that does not 'pander to the nostalgia for the "comforts" of a bygone, Anglo, heterosexist past'(Lee, 1998; see also McClenaghan, 1997). In these ways we might rise to the challenge implicitly posed by these texts about the irrelevance of schooling for many adolescents.

Texts and school contexts: Your right to party

The question for us, once we get beyond media beat-ups of 'censorship', is: to what degree are teachers able to act on the professional knowledge which David Lee describes? To what extent, in constructing a curriculum, and - more importantly - teaching it, are teachers able to address issues of literary merit and cultural significance? What are the factors - the teaching and learning strategies - that allow these issues to energise a curriculum rather than enervate it? How do teachers ensure that they do not practice their own kinds of cultural censorship and deliver curriculums which are dead in the water for most students?

We were visibly reminded of these questions when we recently watched two school drama productions, one a straight version of a West End musical, *Me and My Girl*, the other an updated version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first achieved immortality of sorts as part of an Australian Broadcasting Commission documentary on The Kings School, a prestigious Sydney boys school, which had plenty to say about the differing cultural contexts in which education takes place. What was intriguing was an incident on the last night of the annual school production, a joint venture with an equally prestigious girls' school. The production was a perfectly competent pastiche of the commercial version. Rumour had it that the maids' chorus was about to break out, which it duly did, in an evanescent flash of self conscious naughtiness in which the girls 'flashed', not their 1920s bloomers, but decidedly 1990s silk boxer shorts. It wasn't so much the action, but the reaction, the berating in the dressing room while the show was still in performance which was memorable. Leaving aside the guilt trip about letting the side and hardworking teachers down, and the gender put down of 'behaviour I might have expected from the boys but not my girls', the most insistent argument was that the girls had undermined the integrity of the play, that they had not treated it with the reverence it deserved. But then again how could they? The students were perfectly competent actors, singers and dancers, but where had been the real engagement with the text ? How had they made it their own? How had they done anything but faithfully fill in the blueprint of the director's vision, probably borrowed at that from some commercial production he had seen. The answer, for us, was in that

one moment of rebellion. It was not a spontaneous act of the maids. The entire cast was in on it, and the maids had simply been the executors of this moment of mild protest. The only way they could really engage with the play was to undermine its 'integrity'.

By contrast, the production of *The Dream* had a distinctly grungy, postmodern, eclectic feel, perhaps truer to the spirit of Shakespeare, as Brian Blessed or Barrie Kosky (an avant-garde Australian director) might say, than a faithful chapter and verse rendition of the text. The lovers seemed to have lots of their lines intact but the fairies didn't, though both groups spoke them with an absolute clarity of intention. Oberon's 'train'- lots of young boys in homey gear and spectral pterodactyl like wings - slam danced on to the tune of the Beastie Boys' 'You've got to fight for your right to party' right into the middle of Titania's fairies' fairy rings, giving vivid life to her charge, 'With your brawls you have disturbed our sports'. Bottom and his mates, along with saying their Shakespearean lines, appeared to be preoccupied with ensuring that an ever-present esky was both emptied and replenished. The lovers' quarrel was as much physical as verbal, and Puck's endeavours to keep their quarrel from leading to harm involved a frenetic chase to the William Tell overture complete with smoke and strobe lights. At Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding celebrations, Philostrate introduced the newly weds with a 'shocking' rendition of 'White Wedding', the Spice Girls sang and flirted with the bridegrooms, and Bottom and his gang blew the whole shebang into the sunny skies of absurdity with their impromptu version of 'Riverdance'.

We watched the show over several performances, and no one performance was like any other. One night Puck skateboarded around the earth in forty minutes, another he wandered around having a chat on his mobile phone. On the last night, as Bottom tried to recall his dream, Puck roller bladed past, snatching a tinny out of Bottom's hand, producing a genuine double take that had the shock of the new about it. On one night Oberon's energy seemed the dominant force in the play; on another, Helena's obsession with Demetrius, culminating in a gloriously triumphant rendition of 'Chapel of Love' à la Bette Midler, when she exulted 'going to the chapel AND I'm finally married', as she flashed her bombonerie sparkler of a ring at the audience.

At no point did we feel that the students had undermined the integrity of the play. Rather their irreverence seemed to enhance it. They collectively had taken Shakespeare's play and made it very much their own, a meeting place for their energies, their emotions, their intellects and their cultures. In so doing they demonstrated what Ian Reid has called the 'workshop' approach to teaching and studying literature. By contrast the performance of *Me and My Girl* belonged back in the 'gallery', a faithful reproduction of the original masterpiece, and dead in the water because of it (Reid, 1984).

Beastie Boys versus Barbarians

Our experience of the two plays reminds us that censorship involves more than simply excluding certain texts from the classroom, but also operates through school literacy practices that deny students the opportunity to interrogate what they read or to use texts for their own purposes. We need to recognise that schools 'frame' texts in complex ways (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994).

As English teachers, we can conceive of our work as either opening up interpretative possibilities (or 'frames' for interpretation), or closing them off in the form of 'comprehension' exercises designed to replicate the one true meaning of the text. Not that school literacy practices can easily be classified as either opening up or closing off opportunities for language and learning. In significant respects, the manner in which texts are 'framed' in our classrooms is out of our hands, even when we are consciously striving to create a more interactive environment that enables students to construct a variety of meanings. Students themselves bring varying dispositions to class - those students for whom 'doing' English has always meant comprehension exercises and 'set' texts, will not automatically embrace an alternative pedagogy, as though (like Paul McCartney's blackbird) they were simply waiting for such a moment to arrive.

With respect to school literacy practices like reading the 'set text', or doing comprehension exercises, or writing book reports, we are confronted by a set of traditional habits and assumptions about 'doing English' which are still widely shared by teachers and students alike. Even when we are exploring alternatives to traditional exercises of this kind, those exercises still constitute the environment in which we work. And yet this is not to paint a negative picture of our situation as English teachers. To the contrary, we feel that over recent years we have gained much from learning that more 'open' or 'creative' approaches to texts do not magically transcend the boundaries of schooling, somehow escaping definition as school work (Doecke, 1994; Beavis, 1998). Rather than simply posing hard and fast antitheses - 'gallery' or 'workshop', 'closed' or 'open' approaches to texts - we see ourselves as working continually with the contradictions and complexities that any commitment to exploring alternative possibilities inevitably entails. As a profession we feel we have moved, in short, beyond radical posturing to a serious investigation of how alternative possibilities - alternative imaginings, alternative worlds - might be opened up *through* schooling, not despite it.

Here we are thinking of Ian Hunter's dogged insistence that we should focus on what schools really do, on the work which they actually accomplish in producing a citizenry, in contradistinction to Marxist critiques of schooling as a scene of repression and control, of the manufacture of compliant subjects, at the expense of their creative potential as individual human beings (Hunter, 1988, 1994). To a significant extent, Hunter's own version of schooling crudely reverses the positive and negative signs, and - like Marxist accounts of schooling as the reproduction of existing social relations - he merely supposes that schools accomplish what they set out to do (or what he thinks they set out to do), without considering ways in which the human beings who assemble in school buildings actually engage in the discursive and non-discursive practices they find there. We do not wish to buy into Hunter's idiosyncratic quarrel with Marxism, but simply to acknowledge the complexities of schooling as a context for exploring language and meaning. We might also consider the ways students experience schooling, as they walk in from the outside - from a contrasting network of social relations and discursive practices - and find what they find there. Students' critical engagement in schooling entails a reflexive awareness of their situation as school students; they do not spend all their time in school, but are members of other communities, other worlds; the way they engage in schooling is a function of the relationships and communities in which they live. The production of *The Dream* was memorable because the students were working at the interface between school and their communities, drawing on the rich linguistic resources available to them outside school, in an effort to generate new meanings.

When we think of the Beastie Boys, or Puck, or any of the cast of *The Dream*, concerns about the themes and language of 'grunge fiction' begin to seem very precious. As a matter of fact, not one of these students would swallow the scenes in 'dirty realist' texts whole - some of them have been there and done that, and they have developed a relatively sophisticated and informed perspective on problems currently experienced by young people. They would certainly be amused by attempts to foist more 'uplifting' stories on them that supposedly enable them to escape nihilism and despair (we need only think of the way Helena triumphantly wagged her sparkler at the audience - an ironic comment on the ideology of romance and the traditional happy ending). As students at an inadequately resourced state school, they are in the business of making what they can out of their schooling, in the face of increasing inequalities, of a system which is stacked against them. They are also acutely aware of the difference between media and government rhetoric about their future and the possibilities which are actually available to them. They are committed to making their own futures rather than uncritically accepting the glossy versions contained in government brochures.

Our stories about the Kings' School version of *Me and My Girl* and *The Dream* finally involve far more than contrasting pedagogies. We are confronted by two versions of cultural politics, one involving a ritualised display of culture, the other an intelligent appropriation of the past for the sake of the present; one a blind acceptance of what 'is', the other an irreverant look at existing customs and social relations; one a barbarian display of wealth and privilege, the other a convincing expression of joy and hope. To mediate between these alternatives is a matter of social and political struggle.

After the Dream ... the Nightmare

Australia is currently poised to witness an incredible narrowing of the English curriculum because of the promulgation of standardised testing and a reductive notion of 'literacy' (see *English in Australia* 119-120, 123). The focus on 'basic literacy' presents a new type of threat to maintaining a diverse and inclusive curriculum that would engage students like Puck, Helena, Bottom and Oberan. For the push to get 'back to the basics' - supposedly in order to address the needs of students experiencing literacy difficulties - has been accompanied by renewed attempts to promote wholesome 'literature' that is good for you (a bit like certain breakfast cereals), meaning good family values and a pride in 'our' national identity.

There is no gainsaying the fact that significant groups in the Australian community have been discriminated against by being denied access to literacy, and, in that, important forms of cultural production. Indeed, the existence of such groups throws the text selection and censorship debate into stark relief. John Guillory notes the way in which proponents of cultural diversity and inclusivity in the United States have argued for alternative versions of the literary canon that embody the experiences of oppressed groups, focussing on the inequities reflected by the exclusion of certain books or writers from the syllabus, and yet paying little or no attention to the way schooling 'regulates access to literary production by regulating acces to literacy' (Guillory, 1993: ix). A similar comment might be made about debates about text selection in Australia, as became apparent with the release of a survey of literacy levels of Australian school children, which showed how Aboriginal students have been routinely disadvantaged by schooling. The disadvantages that Aboriginal students have experienced in Australian schools could hardly be addressed by including Roberta Sykes' *Snake Dreaming* or the works of other prominent Aboriginal writers and activitists on the school syllabus. The alienation and sense of disjuncture which Aboriginal students experience when they attend school means that many are streamed out before they reach the senior levels of secondary schooling. For students on remote settlements, schooling remains a strange interlude in their lives; their literacy does not even fit on the 'map' defined by national literacy outcomes (see Masters and Forster, 1998). Similar stories could be told about other groups in Australian society.

We are not trying to dredge up tired old arguments about the need to equip students with basic literary skills before allowing them to venture forth into the wonderful world of language and culture, although this is, in fact, the view of the Federal Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, and other education ministers around Australia. Currently we are witnessing increased funding for literacy programs during the early years of schooling, on the assumption that literacy is, in the first instance, a discrete body of skills which students 'get', which they can then carry across to other areas of their lives. Soon we expect to see increased funding for literacy intervention programs in secondary schools (targetted at 'middle schooling', i.e. Years 5-8), again on the assumptions that students need to be taught the 'basics' before they can enjoy the riches of 'literature' and 'culture'. Kemp has presented this view as a vision of democracy, in which schools equip individual citizens with the basic skills necessary to participate in the wider society, a program which will be enforced by standardised testing and other forms of accountability (Kemp, 1996). That Kemp originally promoted his initiatives in literacy education - which he deemed to be in a state of 'crisis' - by presenting himself as a caring father who read to his children every night might prompt us to wonder why anyone would want to become literate if it is only to enter such a sterile world (*Sixty Minutes*, 1997).

Where does this leave us as far as debating text selection and censorship is concerned? Kemp's wooden notions of 'basic' literacy and the 'treasures' of our culture, his distinction between functional literacy (which he conceives largely in the form of drills and skills and literacy intervention programs with a strong emphasis on phonics) and bedtime reading with dad, are part of the problem rather than a remedy to the cultural disenfrachisement experienced by large numbers of students in Australian schools. Our hunch is that drilling and skilling of the kind he envisages will leave most kids where their teachers found them. Rather than conceiving literacy in narrow, cognitive terms, as a discrete skill that can be developed through individual remediation programs, we should

focus on the juncture (or disjuncture) between school literacy practices and community literacies (cf. Brice Heath, 1982; Freebody 1988). Likewise, when it comes to thinking about the range of texts made available to students in schools, our focus should be on ways in which students can make those texts their own, using them as a vehicle for scrutinising a range of values and beliefs, and for exploring significant dimensions of their contemporary world.

The key thing, however, is that we should be making connections between 'literacy' and the 'literary', reconceptualising the relations between these dimensions as aspects of the social practices embodied in schooling. Not to do so - to complacently accept that a wedge should be driven between these dimensions, as when we think of literacy as a 'basic' skill without considering the cultural and institutional contexts in which literacies are practised, or the cultural politics involved in learning to read and write - is to deny rather than enhance opportunities for language and learning. Kemp's notion of bedtime reading with dad should be seen for what it is: as the most powerful form of censorship and control that we are currently facing in Australia. It is no accident that one of the most influential literacy programs in Australia, namely *Early Literacy* (formerly called *Keys to Life*), is accompanied by a video featuring Anglo Saxon families cheerily reading together at night. Backed up by quantitative research, the difficulties experienced by Somalian or Burmese refugees, or children from other disadvantaged communities, can conveniently be dismissed as variables which do nothing to affect the validity of the basic findings, which is to learn to read and be happy, to close your eyes and climb the Magic Faraway Tree, to dig in the garden with dad while mum makes sandwiches in the kitchen, which you can then wash down with spiffing amounts of home made lemonade.

It is perhaps over-optimistic for us to hope that someday our Federal Minister of Education will wake up to find that he has shed his donkey's ears.

Imaginings

There is no denying the importance of providing students with material that speaks to some aspect of their experiences, and that reflects the cultural diversity of Australian society. So we welcome the experiment of 'dirty realism' or 'grunge fiction', precisely because it tests the boundaries of acceptable fiction, inviting us to reflect on the values and assumptions we bring to our reading, including our sense of who we are and where we fit into the scheme of things. Yet this is not essentially a judgement about the value of these texts *per se*, as though their worth can be decided apart from the contexts in which they are read and appropriated. One of the most limiting aspects of the debate about 'dirty realism' is that it has tended to focus simply on the content of these texts, with people weighing up characters and scenes in terms of their likely impact on teenage readers - all done without regard to the social and cultural contexts which teenagers are obliged to negotiate as they try to make sense of their lives. To paraphrase Tony Bennett, a text is not inherently anything (Bennett, 1980; see also Bennett, 1984); the meaning or value we ascribe to a text is a function of our relationships with others, relationships which are in turn determined by the social and institutional settings in which we live and work.

We wish to affirm our sense of the complexities of classrooms as places for negotiating issues of meaning and value, to insist that our classrooms should be sites for such discussions, and not merely places for transmission and control. To drive a wedge between functional literacy and cultural literacy is to ensure that both lack any critical dimension, that they are simply knowledge which is handed down from above. Such knowledge lets us know our place, as surely as the maids in *Me and My Girl* were upbraided for undermining the integrity of the play. Our aim as English teachers should be, to paraphrase the words of Theseus, to imagine no worse of our students than they of themselves, and to create classroom contexts and practices that will allow them all to pass for excellent men and women.

Puck in the School Yard (An Afterword by Terry Hayes)

I spoke to Puck in the schoolyard the other day. He was sweeping up leaves in the woodwork quadrangle. Punishment duty for some miscreant behaviour. There was a kind of melancholy about him, emphasised by the dark bags under his eyes. It was one of the qualities I liked in his Puck, though it hadn't been present in his auditions. It sort of developed over the rehearsal period and it redeemed his Puck from being just a jolly imp. This Puck felt put upon by all the duties imposed upon him by Oberon, and while he enjoyed the conundrums the lovers found themselves in he felt some sadness about their foolishness as well

'Ah,' I said, 'I am sent with broom before to sweep the leaves behind the door.'

'What?' he replied sullenly. His sullenness was another quality I liked about him. Oberon's orders made him cranky, just as most teachers'orders made him cranky. Not even my friendship with him was a guarantee I could cut through it when he was locked in on his sense of the injustice of the world.

I repeated the quote, adding, 'It's one of Puck's lines in the last scene. We cut it out.'

'Oh yes,' he rejoined, more animatedly, ' My dad gave me a book of Shakespeare's plays' - believable because his father is a media personality - 'I read that bit the other night.'

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